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NOAA Helps Volvo Sailboat Racers Avoid Endangered Whales

BALTIMORE, Maryland, April 18, 2006 (ENS) - Every four years the round-the-world Volvo Ocean Race pits some of the best sailors in the world against one another. Introduced more than 32 years ago by England's Whitbread Company and the British Royal Naval Sailing Association, the race tests seamanship, craftsmanship, hard work and endurance - and the last thing any crew wants is to strike an endangered North Atlantic right whale.

This year's competition began in November 2005 and ends June 2006, and covers more than 28,000 miles of open oceans and 10 ports of call, including Baltimore and Annapolis, Maryland, and New York City.

The seven competing sailboats are in the port of Baltimore right now, and they are heading to New York, then north to the Grand Banks, and across the North Atlantic to the finish line at Gothenburg, Sweden.

They will be less likely to strike a right whale due to a whale locating service offered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) - the NOAA Right Whale Sighting Advisory System.

During the racers' path across the North Atlantic, the NOAA Fisheries Service will provide information on whale locations to Volvo Ocean Race organizers.

The NOAA team flies a series of systematic track lines throughout the year, tracking whales inside areas known to be critical habitat, as well as surveying where whales commonly occur.

The team's sightings are posted on the Internet along with sightings provided by ship-based surveys and opportunistic sightings from the U.S. Coast Guard, whale watch vessels, commercial ships and fishing vessels.

At times, sighting locations are broadcast on NOAA weather radio to sea-going vessels.

"It's been very helpful for both the sailors and the whales alike," said Andy Hindley, Volvo Ocean Race director. "Traveling at 20-plus knots in what is effectively a silent sailboat is always a problem for both the boats and the whales when it comes to collision avoidance."

In 2005, the survey crew flew 129 missions covering more than 50,000 miles of track lines. Since 1998, the NOAA aerial surveys have tracked up to two-thirds of the remaining North Atlantic right whale population off southern New England each spring.

Listed as endangered since 1973, North Atlantic right whales are the rarest of all large whale species that live off the northeastern United States, and among the rarest of all large marine mammal species.

Right whale populations have been nearly wiped out by commercial whaling, and the North Atlantic population numbers around 300 whales.

Ship collisions, propeller strikes and entanglement in fishing gear are now the most common causes of serious injury and death of North Atlantic right whales. Additional disturbances from activities such as whale watching and noise from industrial activities may affect the population as well.

To reduce disturbance from boats, the NOAA Fisheries Service published regulations in 1997 that prohibit vessels from approaching right whales within 500 yards.